

CHRISTMAS IN CANADA




Harry's Temptation

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OR

Christmas in Canada

By R. E. C.

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HARRY'S TEMPTATION

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HARRY'S TEMPTATION

ONE bright morning in December a knot of laughing boys were hurrying along the streets of Halifax, the chief town of Nova Scotia.

From the satchels on their backs you could see that they were on their way to school; but by the look of eager excitement in their faces, it seemed as if some keener pleasure than lessons was in prospect.

Besides, they had with them a few "coasters;" these are long flat pieces of wood on runners, on which boys in Canada sit or lie, whilst they slide down a frozen hill or street.

The sky was deep blue, and the sun so bright that it seemed wonderful that, instead of melting the thick white snow, it only made it glitter like diamonds; and as the pleasant, crunching sound was heard under the boys' feet, they knew that the frost was as hard as ever.

Presently they came in sight of the signal-station, which is situated at the top of a hill in front of the artillery barracks.

This hill looked that morning like a huge conical cake covered with frosted sugar; the masts for the signals on the summit were clearly defined against the cloudless sky, and the figure of the sentry on duty looking in the distance almost as small as if it had been taken out of a box of toys.

The cheerful jingle of the bells of the numerous and many-colored sleighs passing to and fro along the road at the bottom of the hill filled the air with a merry sound, and added to the pleasure of a Canadian winter morning.

The boys soon shouted with delight as they neared the tempting slopes. They ran past the large schoolhouse, the door of which was still closed, and began their coasting operations on a steep inclined street near by.

In some places people would be alarmed to see their roads made still more slippery by this practice of sliding down them, but in Halifax coasting is considered one of the legitimate pleasures of boys of all ages.

Now and then an officer in uniform passed by on his way to the barracks, and smiled to himself at the energy of the youngsters. Well-balancing themselves, down they came full swing from the top to the bottom of the street; but to enjoy the same pleasure again, they had to toil up the icy road, dragging the coasters behind them by pieces of small rope.

The boys were all warmly clad, and a pretty coloring was given to the scene by the many-colored woollen caps worn by those who had not fur ones.

Two of the boys were soon engaged in a hot discussion as to who was entitled to the next slide on the coaster which was their joint property. One was a fine, tall, strong lad of fourteen, his lithe figure looking well in his closely-fitting suit of dark brown cloth; a round fur cap was jauntily set on his curly head, his eyes were kind and blue, and he had a well-formed face, but there was an expression of weakness about his mouth which made one doubtful how he would fare in a sharp test of real moral strength.

The other boy was far more delicate. He was slightly built, thin and small for twelve years old, and his finely-cut features showed a sensitive disposition.

His father had named him Tell, after the Swiss hero whom Schiller has immortalized.

The little fellow's cheeks were now aflame with indignation as he said to his brother, "You know you promised, Harry,



that I should have a slide after you, and you have already had two. You ought to keep your word."

"What right have you to dictate to me?" asked Harry, hotly; "I shall do what I like. Remember that I am older than you, so get out of the way."

Tell's heart swelled within him at the unkind words of his brother. He knew he was only a little fellow, much inferior to big Harry; but then Harry had always been so good to him, and helped him with the rough games, in which otherwise he would not have been able to join, and he had never spoken so unkindly before.

Tell would have better understood the reason of his brother's bad temper, if he had heard the conversation which had taken place at the foot of the hill, when Harry had been jeered at because he could not promise to join in the purchase of a toboggan, his father having no money to spare, as his wife had been ill for a long time. But not having heard this discussion amongst the boys, Tell felt wounded at his brother's conduct, and had to turn his back to hide the tears which would fill his large brown eyes.

"I say, little one, what's the matter?" said a good-natured big boy.

"Nothing," was Tell's prompt reply.

"But I know there is," rejoined the other. At that moment Harry returned, already regretting his unkindness, and coming to offer his big brother the coaster which he had behind him.

Unfortunately the big boy prevented the reconciliation which would then have taken place between the boys, by saying impetuously, "You are a mean fellow, Harry; here, you have had all these slides, and poor little Tell hasn't had any and is nearly crying with cold!"

Harry instantly thought that Tell had been complaining of him, and he turned round to give back an angry retort; but at that moment nine o'clock struck from the signal-station, and the big boy was already rushing along to the schoolhouse.

There was a helter-skelter up the steps into the vestibule, from which the boys had to go down a stone staircase into the schoolroom.

Harry was all the time feeling very bitter against poor little Tell, whose brown head he could see just one step in front of him. To have been spoken to like that by a boy of the first class just because Tell could not wait a moment for his turn made Harry very angry. He was also feeling anxious to be at his desk before his name was called, so when he saw his little brother stop a moment he gave him a hasty push.

The reason of Tell's momentary hesitation was that a piece of matting had caught on his foot, and to Harry's unspeakable horror his hasty action precipitated his brother to the bottom of the flight of steps.

When the boys pushed anxiously down to where he lay, and turned the little fellow on his back, they started with fright when they saw that he was senseless, and that blood was trickling from an ugly wound in his forehead.

Hearing a noise, the rector, who was also head-master of the high school, rose from his desk in the class-room, where he was waiting for his pupils, and came out to see what was the matter. He was a man of middle height, dressed in a long black coat. His hair and beard were white, his face thin and rather worn, but through his gold spectacles it could be seen that his eyes were keen, bright, kind, and sympathetic.

At his approach, the boys made way for him to see poor Tell. The sight of the little fellow lying pale and senseless on the stone floor filled him with anxiety, and he said that a doctor must be sent for immediately.

Harry, with a throbbing at his head and an aching fear at

his heart, rushed once again into the bright sunshine and snow. All the world seemed changed, and he felt as if he had the stamp of murder on his brow.

Fortunately a doctor lived near, and soon returned in a



sleigh with him. At one glance he saw that the fall had given Tell concussion of the brain, and he said that he must be taken home directly. The rector kindly said that he would go with them to break the news to the father and mother.



During the drive Harry sat speechless with anxiety, gazing on the deathlike face of Tell, who was supported by the doctor. Soon he became aware that the rector was speaking to him; but the voice seemed to come from a long way off. The boy, dry-eyed and pale, his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, turned to the rector, who took his hand and said, "You must not feel so badly, Harry; it is a thing which might have happened to anybody. I dare say some snow under Tell's boot made him slip."

In one instant these words showed Harry the unlooked-for possibility of relief from the fear which paralyzed him of confessing his share in the accident.

"Why," whispered Temptation, "was it necessary for him to say anything about that little push? Why should he brave his father's anger, and perhaps his mother's reproaches, when these simple words of the rector would give an explanation without condemning him?"

The jingling of the sleigh-bells now ceased, and they were once more at the home door, from which Tell and he had run off so happily that morning.

The doctor and the rector carried the little fellow into the first room on the ground floor, and Harry went to fetch his mother.

He found her teaching his younger sister in the back room, and as she looked up from the child's copy-book it struck her son how pale and thin her face was; and when he thought of the dreadful news that he was bringing her, his heart failed him, and to his mother's anxious question as to what was the matter he could only say, "Tell is in the next room."

Mrs. Sutherland then pushed back the folding-doors and saw her boy on the sofa with his head bound up, and the

rector and the doctor standing beside him. Harry was in such a state of nervous excitement that he did not dare to hear



what she would say, but stood with his hands pressed over his ears just inside the back room.

In a few minutes he saw his mother pass quickly by, looking a shade paler than usual, but evidently having summoned

all her strength and presence of mind so as to be of use. Tell was soon in bed, and after ice had been put on his head the doctor and the rector left the house, promising to come again in the afternoon.

Harry crept away utterly miserable to his own little bedroom; and, with his burning forehead pressed against the frosted window-pane, he repeated to himself so often his reasons for not telling about that fatal push, that by the time the bell rang for dinner he was quite persuaded that silence was the best and only course for him to pursue.

His father was already at the table when he entered the dining-room. "Well, Harry," he said, "this is a dreadful thing about Tell. The rector said his foot slipped; can you tell us anything more about it?"

Harry had no answer ready for such a direct question, so he took refuge in a lie. After the "No" had been uttered and accepted by the father, who was really too anxious about the present condition of his son to care much about how the fall had happened, Harry felt as if a gulf had opened behind him which nothing could bridge over, and that now he was in an unknown land of deception, where he would have to plod unaided and alone through bogs and morasses of deceit.

The hours passed very slowly to Harry, and he was glad when the hour came for him to go to Mr. Stone, the curate, who was kind enough to help him and his brother every day to prepare their lessons for school.

He ran quickly along the streets, trying, with the pleasant feeling of exercise, to drown the voice of conscience.

He soon arrived at the curate's home, which was a little house turning out of the main street where the cathedral is. The landlady was a kind old woman, who was very pleased

to have a "clergy," as she called him, for a lodger, and so she let him put aside her own furniture, and arrange his sitting-room in his own fashion. Sage-green hangings adorned the fireplace, cricket-bats, flags, trophies, sketches, and book-cases had transformed the common little back room into a comfortable-looking study.



When Harry entered he found that Mr. Stone was not at home, but he knew that the curate would expect him to await his return. He threw himself into the comfortable armchair in front of the fireplace, fully enjoying the warmth after the outside cold.

As he leaned back and crossed his legs, as he had seen Mr. Stone do, and looked lazily about, his eyes fell upon an open

lesson-book which Tell had left there yesterday, and then it occurred to him that having been so selfishly absorbed in his own anxiety about the accident, he had almost forgotten how dreadful it was for his brother.

He began to realize that Tell was so seriously ill that perhaps he would never be well again. Could it be that they would never more learn their lessons together? Would Tell really be deprived of joining in all the cheerful winter sports? What would he not give to see his dear little face as he had seen it only yesterday, with the brown eyes shining with delight as he sat at the other side of the fireplace listening to his brother's account of the pleasures of tobogganing? Had he with that fatal push, perhaps, wrecked little Tell's life?

His face became burning hot at the dreadful thought, and a lump rose in his throat; then, overwrought with all he had gone through, his self-command entirely gave way, he bowed his head in his hands and burst into a fit of uncontrollable sobs.

At that moment there was the sound of opening and shutting the street door, and the curate came up-stairs, humming the air of one of the Christmas carols. He was really happy in the prospect of Harry and Tell's company for the afternoon. Boys were his one pleasure. Far away from his home, and caring little for the society around, he enjoyed the company of these bright boys.

And for Harry he had an especial affection. He seemed to see in him the prospect of a noble, clever man; and he always listened gladly to the day-dreams of the lad as they found a sympathetic echo in his own heart.

Mr. Stone was a tall, well-built young man. His rough coat and astrakhan cap were now sprinkled with snow, and his eyes and cheeks were bright with exercise as he entered the

room. When he saw Harry, he went up to him and laid his hand kindly on his shoulder; and it cut him to the heart when he saw the distressed and tear-stained face which was turned up to meet his.

Mr. Stone sat down in the chair, called to him, and, putting his arm caressingly around him, asked what the matter was.

"It's Tell! it's Tell! what shall I do?" said the poor boy.

"Let me hear all about it," replied the curate, kindly.

Harry felt as if he must relieve his overburdened mind by confessing all; but then came the thoughts, "What is the use of my telling? Perhaps Mr. Stone will be angry with me, and will never speak to me again? It will not make Tell any better now." So, for the second time Harry fell into the temptation, and broken with sobs came the account of the accident without any mention of his own share in it.

Besides feeling sorry for the boy's trouble, Mr. Stone was sad himself to think of his little pupil's misfortune. Gradually Harry became quiet and composed, and when tea was brought in he was sitting by the fire, looking over a book of photographic views; his face pale, but comforted by the sympathy of his kind friend; the gnawing feeling of anxiety and reproach not weighing so heavily on his heart.

Harry belonged to the choir of the cathedral, where Mr. Stone was curate, so when it was nearly seven o'clock they went to church together, as there was to be service that evening.

As the boy took his seat in the chancel with his white-robed companions he keenly missed his brother, who always sat next to him.

According to a service, arranged by the rector for the purpose, the induction of a choir-boy was a solemn and trying

ordeal. The child, in his new surplice, had to kneel before the clergyman at the chancel steps, and there make promises of sincerity and good behavior before he is admitted. It was only a few Sundays ago that Tell, in the presence of a large congregation at the evening service, had joined as a chorister.

Harry recollected how, when he had seen the little surpliced figure of his brother kneeling alone before the clergyman at the steps of the chancel, his heart had been moved with affection and sympathy; and when, on taking his seat next to him, Tell had slipped a cold little hand into his, Harry had joined earnestly in the prayer that the new chorister might have strength to keep his vows, in his own mind determining to do all he could to help him.

Tears now filled Harry's eyes, and he was glad that the prayers going on enabled him to hide his face, as he thought that perhaps he would never hear again that clear ringing voice at his side, and all because he had given that fatal push. The burden of his secret was being felt again, and under the sweet influence of the service, and the naturally good impulses of his heart, he almost determined to confess it all.

But Harry's nature was weak, and by the time he had taken off his surplice he had succumbed for the third time to the temptation of keeping silence.

A few days went by; Tell was very ill. The fall had affected his brain. The doctor looked grave, and the parents nursed the little patient night and day. They were also anxious to see that Harry seemed to grow paler and thinner every day, while he was very impatient if any remarks were made about his appearance.

Mr. Stone often sat up with Tell during the night, so as to let the father have time to rest, and when he was having

breakfast at his lodgings before going to morning service, Harry used to come in on his way to school to go over his lessons again before class time.

It made the curate quite anxious to see how Tell's illness seemed to weigh upon his young friend's mind. He would often take the boy for a walk or a sleigh-ride, trying to cheer him up. Then he kindly lent him his skates, which were not much too large for him, so that the lad should have distraction in that exercise; and as Christmas was approaching, he was thinking of buying him a toboggan, a possession which Harry in his most hopeful day-dreams never expected to have.

In our interest in Harry we must not forget Kathleen, his little sister. She sorely missed her brother Tell; and when she found that he was so sick she could not go in and play with him, she pined for his society. One day Mr. Stone found her crying on the stairs. It seemed that she had dressed up her favorite doll, and placed it inside Tell's bedroom door, thinking it could not fail to interest him; but to her distress she found that he took no notice of it.

Mr. Stone felt sorry for the little girl, and when he had been in to see the patient, who was still very ill, he took Kathleen with him to St. Luke's schoolroom, where ladies were busy preparing the Christmas decorations for the cathedral. There the child was very much cheered, for everybody was very kind to her, and they told her that they wanted her help. She ran backwards and forwards to the large heap of spruce in the corner, filling her arms with the green branches, which she took to the groups of people sitting round the stove, busily covering the sticks of wood which were required for the reredos. Every now and then the door opened, and a man or woman came in to say that more spruce had been brought,



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and the glistening heap all covered with snow was carried in.

So the day before Christmas broke over Halifax. This had hitherto always been a cheerful festival for Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland, now they were very unhappy. Harry was restless, and looked very haggard. He avoided his parents as much as possible, and in his inquiries for his brother showed an irritable impatience at his non-improvement, for the doctor still thought him in danger.

Little Kathleen pined for Tell, and her natural childlike sleep had given way to feverish dreams and bad nights. On the previous Sunday Tell had been prayed for in church, and Mr. Stone noticed how pale Harry turned when the rector said to the boys in the choir, that probably they would never see again amongst them one who was loved by them all.

All day, in spite of the streets being covered with ice, and a continued fall of snow, people were eagerly running to and fro to the attractive and well-lighted shops, bringing out and stowing away under the buffalo-ropes of the sleighs interesting-looking brown-paper parcels.

All the decorations had been put up in the cathedral, and at seven o'clock there was evening service, concluding with a beautiful selection of carols. The church looked its very best, with the tastefully arranged and many-colored banners, gold-lettered texts on crimson grounds, a cleverly designed reredos covered with spruce, and quantities of flowers. The bishop and rector officiated, and with the chancel filled with the surpliced choristers, who, with their ringing voices, sang one carol after another, it was a natural and beautiful prelude to Christmas.

It had been a long and tiring day to Harry and Kathleen,

who had been busy preparing gifts for their parents, in which occupation they had not been very successful, as they sadly missed Tell's ready help and power of contrivance. Decorations, carols, and presents could not rouse Harry from the apathetic state which had been growing on him since he had had that dreadful secret on his mind.

He went to bed tired and worn out. He did not pull the blind down, as it made him feel less lonely to see the rays of the moon pouring through the frosted window-pane on to his bed. He heard the clock down-stairs strike hour after hour, and yet he could not sleep. At last he fell into a slight doze, when he heard the words ring out clearly and distinctly in the silence, "Tell, Tell."

His conscience had often told him to confess, but he had never heard the command audibly uttered. He shivered with fear at hearing these words repeated again, not knowing whence they came. They seemed to bring accusation of the sin he had committed. He tremblingly remembered that people are hanged for murder, and his blood seemed to freeze in his veins.

He could not rest with such thoughts surging through his brain, so he got up and slipped softly into the hall. He looked over the banisters, and saw down in the hall the cheerful glow of the fire in the stove, which during the winter is never allowed to go out in a Canadian home. He thought he would fetch a book from the parlor, when, on passing the door of Kathleen's bedroom, which was open, he was startled to see his little sister raise herself suddenly in her crib, and looking at him with eyes to which sleep gave a strange expression, she said excitedly, "Tell, Tell."

Evidently the little girl's mind was still running on her



brother, and so in her dreams she called for him; but to Harry's excited imagination it seemed as if he saw his sister emphatically reminding him of the duty he had to fulfil.

He crept back to bed ashamed, and determined that nothing should prevent him confessing all at the earliest opportunity.

He hardly slept all night, and directly he heard the bells ringing for the early service he dressed himself and ran off to the cathedral. He overtook a few men warmly clad, and ladies well wrapped in furs, who were hurrying to church. Harry, during the impressive service, kept saying to himself, "I will tell! I will tell!" but more than once his heart failed him, and he was tempted to go home without doing so.

When Mr. Stone was leaving the church, after the service was over, Harry ran up to him and said, "Oh, sir, I have something most important to tell you."

"All right, my boy," was the reply; "come home with me."

So Harry accompanied his kind friend to his lodgings, and as he went up the little staircase he was terribly anxious at what he had to go through.

As he entered the study, which was strewn with Christmas cards, directed envelopes, brightly bound books, and presents for boys whom he knew, his eyes fell upon a beautiful toboggan.

Even in this time of anxiety he remembered how much he had wished for one, but now all that seemed so trivial compared to the importance of the present moment.

Mr. Stone, following the boy's glance, placed his hand kindly on his shoulder, and said, "There, Harry, that's for you."

But the lad, bravely summoning all his courage, turned

round to his friend, and with his hands convulsively clasped together said, "Don't speak to me until you hear that I have killed Tell." Then hurriedly, but clearly, came the account of his irritable feelings at not being allowed to join in the purchase of a toboggan, his anger in thinking that his brother had been complaining of him, ending in the impatient push which had caused Tell's fall.

Mr. Stone's face became graver and graver at what he heard, for it grieved him intensely to think that his favorite pupil had so deceived him, while at the same time he saw that the boy had suffered much.

When the account was over he said, "You must now come with me and tell the rector." A shiver went through the lad as he saw that another ordeal was before him, but there was no withstanding the firm voice and grieved look of the curate, so he put on his cap, and silently followed Mr. Stone into the street. The rector's house was near.

They were shown into the drawing-room, which looked dull and cheerless at this early hour, but a glow came from the dining-room beyond, where preparations were beginning for breakfast. Mr. Stone knew the rector too well to think that when help was required from him he would ever find anybody unwelcome.

As he then entered the room, his face wore an expression of anxious concern. Without any needless talk Mr. Stone simply shook hands and said, "I have brought Harry, sir, because he has something to tell you." Then the boy for the second time had to make the confession.

The clergyman was shocked to find that such a secret had been on Harry's mind for so many days; but, with his long experience with boys, he saw that it had not been so without



much mental pain, so he placed his hands kindly on the lad's shoulders, and looking him gravely in the face he said, "Your sin has been very great, Harry, but God grant that you may be forgiven, and that your brother may be spared." Harry's lips quivered, and he turned to hide his face. After the rector had talked kindly and considerately with him for a few minutes, Harry and Mr. Stone left the house, and were soon in the street again on their way home. They went straight to Harry's home. There, when they entered the dining-room, they found Mrs. Sutherland making tea, with an expression of rest on her face which had not been seen for days.

She turned round at the entrance of her son with the curate, and said, eagerly, "Such good news! Tell woke up this morning quite himself again, and asked for you, Harry."

Mr. Stone knew that Harry wished his mother to know his secret, but taking pity on the boy who had already gone through so much, he sent him up-stairs to see his brother. Then taking a seat by the fire, he told Mrs. Sutherland how wrongly her son had acted, but he also told her how much the boy had endured.

The mother was sorely grieved, but she had felt that something had been wrong to cause the lad to be so depressed. By especial orders of the doctor, nothing was to be said which might excite Tell. Although still very ill, Harry was glad to see that his brother's large brown eyes looked at him eagerly as he entered the room, but he could only give him an affectionate, boyish kiss, and say how pleased he was to see him better. Mr. Stone soon came up, delighted to find his little friend on the road to rapid recovery and able to receive the presents intended for him and enjoy to some extent the Christmas festivities.

Thus Christmas Day brought to the Sutherlands greater happiness than was expected.

After Christmas Tell's recovery was rapid, and before many weeks he was able to be up and about, and was soon sharing in the winter sports of his schoolmates.

But long before this time, in fact as soon as he could be wrapped up and carried out of doors, he was given a ride on the new toboggan. Harry had insisted that Tell should be the first to use it, and should share equally with him in the ownership. Before the end of the long Canadian winter, the boys spent many a happy hour on the "Long Coast."

THE END.

